



To:
Councillor Robert Smith
Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

BY EMAIL

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Summary: This is a letter from the Education Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Education and Learning following the meeting of the Panel on 14 November 2024. The Panel discussed the Schools Admissions Policy, Strategy for Poverty Proofing the school day and Careers Advice in schools.

Dear Cllr Smith,

Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 14 November 2024

We would like to thank you and the officers from the Education Directorate for attending the meeting and providing information for the Panel. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the views of the Panel.

School Admissions Policy

The Head of the Vulnerable Learners Service gave us an update on the Schools Admissions Policy outlining the context and background, the current position and the School Admissions Forum review outcomes.

Four members of the public attended our meeting for the 'public questions' section of the agenda, in addition to the written questions we had received. All the questions asked referred to the part of the School Admissions Policy relating to the admittance of a sibling to a school when one child already attends the school. Specifically, when that school is oversubscribed and priority extending to the sibling is not part of the Swansea Council Policy.

In response to the question raised, the Head of the Vulnerable Learners Services told the Panel that the Education Department want to offer families their first preference and do not want to separate siblings. Also, saying that they believe the Councils arrangements offer the best chance of the highest number of applicants achieving their

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first preference. Modelling has been undertaken on other suggested arrangements which confirms our thinking that the current arrangements offer the best chance to families of gaining their first preference and staying with siblings. Concerns had been heard from a small number of families and we recognise admission applications can be an anxious time. Our further review and revised modelling considered these representations but the findings of these, along with our consistent (year on year) high first preference rate and very low in catchment refusal rates confirm our belief that the long standing and legally compliant arrangements are also the most equitable. The full written response has been attached to the minutes of this meeting.

The Panel thanked the members of the public who attended in order to share their experiences, as well as the Head of Vulnerable Learners Service for the detailed response to the questions raised. We concluded that there was a difficult balance to be had with this issue and that the Council and Cabinet Member must continue to be mindful of the concerns that can be caused by this policy decision.

Poverty Proofing the school day

The Panel thanked the Head of Education, Planning and Resources for the report outlining how the Council and schools are working to poverty proof the school day. We heard about how the pupil deprivation grant is being spent, the roll out of universal school meals and how schools are addressing the issues relating to the cost of the school day. We were pleased to hear that Partneriaeth are also providing training linked to this, where schools are asked to consider things like the cost of school trips and the cost of not uniform days and/or dressing up days, which can affect attendance for children living in poverty.

We asked

- *What sort of sharing and learning on this is happening across schools in Swansea?* We were told that we do share good practice amongst our schools. The report mentioned how School Improvement Advisers go out with a checklist to see what the schools are spending their PDG money on. They are, therefore, the main conduit to sharing practice. There is also a weekly newsletter that is used to speak to schools as well as conferences where practice is shared.
- *What is done to ensure those previously eligible for free schools meals are still applying, given the roll out of universal school meals, in order to ensure the school can claim the PDG and the parents can claim the school uniform grant?* We were told that information is regularly sent to schools for them to send out to their parents. The Welsh Government also sends the local authority posters and other information that can be shared with schools and parents. Social media channels like Facebook and X (formally Twitter) are also used.
- *How are these things linked up with other Council policies to provide for example, meals in schools holidays etc?* We were told that during the school holidays there is a grant that is available for food (and fun) for schools which they can apply for. This was previously limited to schools with more than 16% free school meals, but this year the Welsh Government are trying to encourage the other schools to try and run that holiday programme. It is for a two week period in the holidays and has proved successful in the schools that have run it. The Council also has a food holiday scheme as well but that is run through another directorate and that is available to community groups.

- *Take up of universal school meals is lower in some schools, what can be done about this?* We suggested that getting pupils more involved in the menu choices may help. There was also concern raised about the portion size of the meal which was deterring some children from taking this up. We were told that many children still take a packed lunch in and that it is about breaking that cycle and trying to promote school meals, as it is an entitlement for everybody who has a child in primary school.

We agreed it is encouraging to hear that poverty proofing is being considered in our schools and to see the positive impact that this is having on children in Swansea.

Careers Advice in Swansea schools

We thanked the Strategic Skills Co-ordinator for the detailed report provided. We heard about the advice, information and guidance provided to pupils and schools about Careers, also how parents and carers are being engaged in this work. The Panel were pleased to see good progress in this area.

Your Response

We would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter but on this occasion do not require a formal response.

Yours sincerely

COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES

Convener, Education Scrutiny Performance Panel

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